

## Historein

Vol 16, No 1-2 (2017)

Greek Historiography in the 20th Century: Opening a Research Agenda



Review of Dimitris Plantzos', Αρχαιολογίες του Κλασικού: Αναθεωρώντας τον εμπειρικό κανόνα [Archaeologies of the Classical: Reconsidering the empirical rule]

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doi: [10.12681/historein.9199](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.9199)

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### To cite this article:

Vavouranakis, G. (2017). Review of Dimitris Plantzos', Αρχαιολογίες του Κλασικού: Αναθεωρώντας τον εμπειρικό κανόνα [Archaeologies of the Classical: Reconsidering the empirical rule]. *Historein*, 16(1-2), 178–181.  
<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.9199>

**Dimitris Plantzos**

*Οι αρχαιολογίες του κλασικού:  
Αναθεωρώντας τον εμπειρικό κανόνα*

**[Archaeologies of the classical:  
reconsidering the empirical rule]**

**Athens: Ekdoseis tou Eikostou  
Protou, 2014. 376 pp.**

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Arranging ancient monuments in a chronological and cultural sequence has traditionally been considered as the main duty of Greek archaeologists. This way, material remains can either be used to crosscheck information from ancient texts or disclose the cultural identity and the way of life of past people. Empiricist epistemology remains strong in Greece, albeit more in classical rather than prehistoric archaeological discourse, despite the global developments in the discipline of archaeology during the last half century. Greek archaeology remains significantly undertheorised and this feature affects both its disciplinarians and the wider public. As a result, the main aim of Dimitris Plantzos' book, which is a critical review of the empiricist doctrine of classical archaeology, constitutes a departure from current tendencies, particularly as regards research published in Greek.

The book has eight chapters. The first (Introduction) offers a concise review of the main archaeological paradigms, although the reader should be cautious of the inaccurate attribution of behavioural and cognitive approaches to postprocessual archaeology, as these research directions grew within the positivist atmosphere of processual archaeology. Leaving

such misconceptions aside, the introduction establishes the need for classical archaeology to go beyond empiricism and join world archaeology on the couch of in-depth self-reflection and analysis of its theoretical and wider epistemological paradigmatic subconscious.

Chapter two embarks on this endeavour with a frontal attack on one of the constitutive concepts of archaeology: time. Plantzos argues against the unilineal and sequential notion of time based on the laws of thermodynamics and on phenomenological philosophy. His argument is reminiscent of well-known Anglophone literature.<sup>1</sup> Plantzos soon switches from the deconstruction of sequential time to the deconstruction of the art object and of the artefact. He employs a triad of French philosophers – Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida – in order to argue for the multiple and frequently contrasting significations of material culture.

This diversion paves the way for the third chapter, which delves into the intellectual foundations of classical archaeology. The establishment of empiricism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries overempowered the artefact as a response to the epistemological need for an objective approach to the past and its remains. This overempowerment mystified and decontextualised material remains, led classical archaeology to an epistemological standstill and gave rise to ethnocentric narratives of Greek identity.

Chapter four turns to the study of iconography and the classification of Attic pottery, more specifically to the methodology established by Sir John Beazley. This methodology is paralleled to Sherlock Holmes's deductive reasoning, which employed the details from a crime scene to pinpoint the criminal. In the same vein, Attic red-figured pottery vases were attributed to painters on the basis of seemingly

minor details in the execution of their decoration. Plantzos demonstrates that this method betrays a modernist focus on important individuals, such as the creators of ancient art, who thus become ahistorical figures, while it deprives ancient art itself of its social and historical context, wherein it is only possible to actually appreciate it.

The next chapter continues the deconstruction of traditional art historical methodologies in classical archaeology by highlighting their logocentric prioritisation of ancient texts over artefacts. Many excavation projects have restricted themselves to the identification of a specific site with an ancient city mentioned by Pausanias or some other ancient author. Such methodologies are here considered as formalist and narrow in scope. An alternative approach should examine material culture as an active constituent of ancient Greek society and not as a passive receiver of abstract significations. Drawing on Alfred Gell's book *Art and Agency*, Plantzos suggests that the significance of an eight-century BC *kylix*, a type of cup, with an inscription referring to the Homeric poems, does not lie in the inscription itself but in the ability the cup had attained to bring together men in order to consume drink, connect to tales about the heroes of Troy and renegotiate the aristocratic qualities whereupon Archaic society hinged. It was not the shape, decoration or the inscription alone that mattered but the ways in which the cup facilitated and participated in a context of social performance.

Chapter six examines themes revolving around the connection between the human body and identity. After highlighting the importance of sculpture as a springboard for the scholarly interest in Greek antiquity during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, the discussion focuses on the importance of statues in antiquity

as material promotions of the collective ethos of the time. For example, the sculptural pairing of the tyrannicides, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, prompted its viewer to take a stance, either with the two lovers whose acts paved the way to democracy or against them and with the tyranny of the Peisistratids. Plantzos concludes that the perception of sculpture in ancient Greece was dominated by the male homoerotic and/or homosocial gaze. He then makes a contrast with the modernist and current perceptions of ancient sculpture and with the ways in which such perceptions served ethnocentrism either directly or indirectly, such as in the fascist ideologies of the 1930s or in current Greek social groups which reenact ancient battles in a rather grotesque manner.

Chapter seven deals with the issue of space. It initially reviews the shift in research from the traditional interest in the civic centres of ancient towns to the exploration of the role of the countryside in ancient Greek society and the related survey projects in the 1980s and 1990s. Plantzos then outlines the basic theoretical premises of landscape archaeology, of the Annales school and of world systems and network theories, to conclude that the landscape is not simply the setting for classical antiquity. Landscapes embody memory and the architectural remains of the past are part of this materially embodied memory. He then goes on to argue that the restoration and promotion of archaeological sites have produced an ahistorical version of the ancient monuments and rendered them idealised and even mystified heterotopias that serve the long-shot ethnocentric anchoring of modern Greek identity in ancient Greece. It is proposed that monuments should not be cast as symbols but as allegories: starting premises for further dynamic and fluid reflection on issues of identity. This reflection should not follow the top-down order of traditional classical archaeology

but should actively engage with the piecemeal daily attempt of ordinary people to encroach and refashion hierarchical structures.

The following chapter examines at first the discovery of Greek antiquity by the western world and the rise of its popularity. It is argued that archaeology was an attempt to colonise the past through the discovery and study of its material remains. This attempt, on the one hand, served the rise of bourgeois ideology and the emergence of urban republican states and, on the other, helped western powers to consolidate their rule over their colonies. Greece was a crypto-colony, as it nominally became an independent state in the 1830s, but its archaeology was dominated by an imported western modernist approach, while the so-called foreign archaeological schools have always played a key role in the production of archaeological work and of the wider knowledge about the past. However, and instead of viewing modern Greece as a semiwesternised country, Plantzos proposes that the yardstick of the western modernist agenda should be dropped and culture should be seen as inherently hybrid and dynamic. Instead of the static essentialism brought by the empiricism that traditionally engulfed classical archaeology, we should turn to the diverse ways in which the classical past and its material remains offer opportunities to reflect on our current conditions of life. In this way, the classical world will cease to be a moral straightjacket and would transform into a role model and a source for inspiration.

As a whole, Plantzos has managed to produce a concrete and nuanced theoretical discourse on the epistemological premises of classical archaeology and a valuable addition to the specific research field. His theoretical tour de force is presented in an eloquent writing style that ensures the book will appeal not only to theory-versed researchers but also to under-

graduate archaeology students and even to the wider public. The arguments in each chapter frequently follow a meandering course but the overall message of the book is clear. Classical archaeology is an offspring of western modernism. Its formalist empiricism has idealised classical material remains and hence rendered them ahistorical heterotopias employed in ethnocentric top-down ideological disciplining of society and its future.

It should be noted that classical archaeology has covered significant epistemological ground since Beazley standardised the art history study of ancient Greek artefacts. There are many classical archaeologists devoted to fieldwork and to the contextual analysis of the archaeological record, while others have made important contributions to archaeological theory. Admittedly, Plantzos acknowledges such contributions and is clear that the achievements of traditional empiricism should be not be eschewed but embedded in a wider frame of dynamic engagement with classical antiquities. His call joins the work of classicist scholars of the so-called Paris school, such as Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant. Furthermore, Plantzos pertains that the new epistemological frame of classical archaeology should be fair to the social diversity, fluidity and hybridity of the past and the present. The classical past should be a source of inspiration and facilitation of future renegotiations of collective memory and identity.

Despite a long and meticulous deconstructive trajectory, this last message leaves the reader of the book with an optimistic feeling. Ironically enough, it echoes the words of the poet Giorgos Seferis, a prominent member of the so-called 1930s generation of intellectuals that has been subjected to criticism by Plantzos for adhering to the modernist and ethnocentric image of classical antiquity:

I imagine that he who'll rediscover life, in spite of so much paper, so many emotions, so many debates and so much teaching, will be someone like us, only with a slightly tougher memory. We ourselves can't help still remembering what we've given. He'll remember only what he's gained from each of his offerings. What can a flame remember? If it remembers a little less than necessary, it goes out; if it remembers a little more than necessary it goes out. If only it could teach us, while it burns, to remember correctly.<sup>2</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 For example, Gavin Lucas, *The archaeology of time* (London: Routledge, 2005).
- 2 From George Seferis, "Mr. Stratis Thalassinou describes a man: 5. Man," *Collected poems*, rev. ed., trans., ed. and intro. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), 73–74.

**Jennifer Mara DeSilva, ed.**

***The Sacralization of Space and Behavior in the Early Modern World: Studies and Sources***

**Burlington: Ashgate, 2015. viii + 326 pp.**

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Recently, the so-called spatial turn in the social sciences and humanities has prompted historians to rethink the past through its spatial signification. At the same time, scholarship has demonstrated that, as a social and cultural construction, space constantly, variously and dynamically interacted with social relations, identity formation, power politics, collective practices and group or individual tactics. The increasing interest in space as a category of historical analysis has only partially informed early modern studies, though.<sup>1</sup> Hence, this collection of essays, focusing on the sacralisation of space, makes an important contribution to that expanding field and raises crucial questions about space, its historicity and its intersections with discourses and practices about the sacred and the profane in the early modern world.

In this volume, sacred space is not taken as a stable and clearly demarcated category but as a mutable, ambiguous and often contested site over which the process of sacralisation (and/or desecration) was continuously underway. As the editor Jennifer Mara DeSilva aptly notes, the book explores how early modern sacred space "was created, used, described, reformed, and destroyed" (20). The authors of the volume do not define sacred space in narrow terms (churches, shrines, churchyards); they